

Share and explore Pearl Harbor stories.

Rodney West, M.D.

Naval Reserve



Rodney T. West, M.D. was born on the island of Maui in the then Territory of Hawaii. He graduated from the Punahou School in Honolulu and attended Northwestern University in Chicago, where he earned his Medical Degree. He returned to the Islands, spent 18 months as an intern and resident at the Queen's Hospital and then went into a private practice in Honolulu. He joined the United States Naval Reserve in January of 1940. Twenty months later, September 5, 1941, he was called to active duty and was stationed at the Medical Dispensary on Ford Island in Pearl Harbor and was there on the morning of December 7, 1941. He spent the rest of World War II on Johnston Island in the Pacific and at various Naval Air Stations on the American mainland. At the end of the war, he returned to Honolulu and on March 26, 1946 was discharged from active duty. In September of 1949, he resigned from the Naval Reserve as a full Commander. Then, after practicing on the Big Island of Hawaii for a year, he returned to Honolulu and joined the Obstetrics and Gynecological department of the Straub Clinic. In December of 1956, after delivering at least 5,000 babies - and other things, he retired from the practice of medicine. In 1963, he served as the President of the Hawaii Medical Association and in 1975, he helped found and was the first president of the American College of Physician Executives.

On the morning of December 7, 1941, Dr. West rushed into the Ford Island dispensary to help with the wounded. In the middle of the quadrangle of the dispensary, there was a huge crater in the ground, which was caused by a bomb meant for the USS California, moored nearby. Had the bomb be a few feet more off target, it would have gone through the dispensary and killed or injured even more. Dr. West remained on Ford Island from December 7th to the 11th, working at the dispensary. Most of the wounded were sailors from the sinking and listing battleships, who had to swim through the burning oil in the waters of Pearl Harbor. Most of the injuries were flesh burns, since most of the sailors had been wearing shorts and t-shirts, and the burned areas were those that were exposed. After Dr. West gave them preliminary care, the wounded were sent to the U.S. Naval Hospital at Hospital Point for further attention.

The 50th anniversary of the events of World War II was a very inspirational time for Dr. West. These activities reminded him of the many Honolulu civilians who had volunteered their talents to insure that Hawaii was prepared for a major disaster. These preparations began because of the war that was already happening in Europe in the 1930's. In 1939, Dr. West acted with a group of concerned Honolulu residents from the Hawaii Chapter of the American Red Cross, the Honolulu County Medical Society, the City and County Emergency Unit, and the Queen's Hospital that help set up a program that prepared O'ahu for a serious disaster. Volunteers were trained to run a blood bank night and day; to manage multiple first-aid stations; to be able to drive ambulances to pick up wounded and dying in a combat situation; to be able to transport families with children to safer areas; to know how to feed hundreds of workers; to be willing to deliver supplies to civilian and military hospitals; and to possess the knowledge to assist the Red Cross - just to name a few. The preparations that were meticulously attended to in the eighteen months prior to the attack, went into full gear on December 7, 1941, and these early preparations saved many lives. History consistently reminds us that the Japanese attack on the island of O'ahu was a total surprise, but the quick civilian response on that Sunday morning proved that the island was indeed prepared in one area. The reminders of the many Honolulu civilians who had volunteered for a over a year prior to the attack and were willing to place themselves into a dangerous situation inspired him to write a book about these efforts. Dr. West's book, Honolulu Prepares for Japan's Attack was first published in 1992 and is now in its seventh printing. This book is for sale at the Arizona Memorial Museum Association Bookstore, where Dr. West signed copies and greeted visitors every Wednesday until shortly before his passing in 2008.